Fact Sheet: How Washington is working to reduce PCBs and mercury in Puget Sound

from Ecology's Office of Information and Education

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Photo

With PCBs and mercury showing up in Puget Sound fish, we have compelling evidence that there is a problem in Puget Sound.

Contact:
Janice Adair,
Special Assistant for Toxics Reduction, Washington Department of Ecology,
360-407-0291

PCBs

Polychlorinated biphenyls, PCBs, persist in the environment even though they were banned by the EPA in 1979. PCBs are toxic to human health and the environment. They break down slowly and get in the food chain because they accumulate in the fat of animals and humans.

After the ban took effect, scientists initially tracked a steep decline in PCB concentrations in Central Puget Sound. Today, scientists continue to find PCBs in Puget Sound's marine mammals, fish and shellfish. The trend line remains flat and we are not seeing a further decline in PCBs in Puget Sound. Sites that are contaminated with PCBs may be the primary source of the chemical. More effort is needed to identify PCBs and clean them up throughout Puget Sound.

What we are doing to reduce PCBs in Puget Sound

We are developing a comprehensive inventory of the primary sources of toxic chemicals, including PCBs, in Puget Sound in support of the recommendations of the Puget Sound Partnership. Phase one of this project is expected to be delivered in summer 2007. Currently, we control and oversee PCBs through the state and federal cleanup regulations and through monitoring of fish tissue, sediments and water.

We are making progress to cleanup PCBs in the Puget Sound area. Some examples include:

- Lower Duwamish Waterway – Ecology and the EPA are working to clean up PCB-contaminated sediments and control sources of recontamination in the Lower Duwamish Waterway that flows into Elliott Bay. Seven areas along the river have been identified as candidates for high-priority sediment cleanup.
- Commencement Bay, Tacoma – In this Superfund cleanup, Ecology and EPA partnered to block the flow of PCBs and remove PCB contaminated sediments in the Hylebos and Thea Foss waterways. Stormwater control is the next priority for the city, Ecology and EPA, because it threatens to re-contaminate the bay.

Storm water may carry PCBs into Puget Sound

It is believed that PCBs and other toxic chemicals are carried into Puget Sound by storm water. Ecology has worked with large cities to control storm water. Now it is working with medium-sized cities to control the harmful runoff. Storm water gets into Puget Sound after rain and melted snow drain off rooftops, paved streets, highways, and parking lots. As it flows downhill, it picks up a variety of pollution that harms and pollutes streams that provide habitat for fish and wildlife. Since storm water cannot be treated to remove PCBs, we must remove sources of PCBs.

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Reducing mercury

Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and can also be released into the air through industrial pollution from consumer products, such as thermometers, switches and fluorescent light bulbs. Once mercury is released, it falls from the air and can accumulate in streams and oceans. It turns into methylmercury in the water. This type of mercury can be harmful to unborn babies and young children. Fish absorb the methylmercury as they feed in these waters and so it builds up in them and in the food chain. There is a national drive to reduce and isolate mercury and Washington is a leader in those efforts.

Washington state started implementing a mercury reduction chemical action plan in 2003 that eliminates or reduces the use of mercury in consumer products. Ecology has worked successfully with the dental industry and hospitals to reduce mercury, and now is helping local governments collect mercury-laden thermostats and fluorescent lamps. Since June, automobile recyclers in Washington have collected more than 10,000 light switches from the hoods and trunks of junk vehicles that contain toxic mercury. For more information: *http://www.ecy.wa.gov/mercury/*

Reducing the flow of toxics into Puget Sound

Ecology is working to reduce and eliminate the flow of toxic contamination into Puget Sound through the state's cleanup and hazardous waste regulations, and with the Puget Sound Partnership.

In the recent legislative session, the Legislature and the Governor took advantage of the historic increase in funds in state and local toxics control accounts – and made a large investment in accelerating the cleanup of toxic sites throughout the state – including the waters and shorelines of Puget Sound and Hood Canal.

Our state now is one of the first in the nation – in fact, one of the first jurisdictions in the world – to require manufacturers of electronics to provide free recycling of electronics within our borders. If our obsolete electronic devices are not disposed of properly, they break down in landfills and release toxins into the ground and water. Consumers can recycle their old TV sets and computers without charge or new tax, because manufacturers will be required to establish and pay for the recycling

Opportunity to reduce toxic chemicals that persist in our environment

With the lessons learned about PCBs and mercury, Washington is working to reduce other chemicals, such as flame retardants, that persist and get into the food chain. We refer to these chemicals as PBTs, persistent bioaccumulative toxins.

Learn more about how the state is reducing toxics at:
http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/eap/pbt/pbtfaq.html